

Plain wheat flour is a low-margin business that many consumers consider an undifferentiated, basic commodity.

"If you want to make money, you don't grow potatoes; you sell potato chips. You don't sell flour; you sell breakfast cereal," explained Jeffrey Hamelman, a certified master baker and retired original director of King Arthur's Norwich bakery.

But COVID-19 has affected almost everything, including the flour world.

March is the slowest time of the year for flour sales, although it leads up to Easter, which is the second busiest baking season after the winter holidays.

So Bill Tine, King Arthur's vice president of marketing, was surprised when, seemingly out of the blue, hotline call volume took its giant leap in mid-March.

Tine said he recalls a late Sunday evening phone call to check in with colleagues about the unusual numbers. But, honestly, he said, that period of time is a blur. King Arthur, like every essential business, was busy figuring out how to keep going and keep its employees safe. Then, unexpectedly, they were simultaneously faced with the sudden spike in demand for flour and baking advice.

The week of March 16 was when grocery store orders started to pick up in an unseasonal way. Over the next four weeks, they leapt 600 percent over prior year sales, Tine said. There were well-publicized shortages of toilet paper and hand sanitizer, but, he said, "It was a little bit of a shock that all of a sudden flour became, like, the third thing that started to go out of stock."

In response to empty grocery shelves, more consumers ordered direct from King Arthur than ever before, reaching six times normal sales.

On April 19, the company tallied a new one-day website traffic high of close to 1 million user sessions and 2.3 million page views. It blew past the previous record of 542,000 sessions on the day before Thanksgiving 2019.

And the orders looked different, Tine said. Direct sales were traditionally a mix of harder-to-find specialty products. But now consumers were ordering the core supermarket item they could not find: King Arthur's signature 5-pound red-and-white paper bag of flour.

While management was scrambling to get those bags back on grocery shelves nationwide, Furch, her hotline colleagues and the team that handles social media interactions were on a never-ending hamster wheel.

As call volume snowballed, it started to feel "like a continual Christmas season," Furch recalled. All told, the calls, emails, social media interactions and web traffic across April and May saw a sixfold increase.

Management did what it could to deepen the bench. The four-person digital engagement team grew to 17, thanks to bakers and baking instructors whose regular jobs were on hold or much reduced. The hotline similarly drew on six reinforcements from within the company, bringing its ranks to 21.

At no time, according to Tine, did the company technically run out of flour. What it ran out of was enough bagged flour to feed the newly voracious appetite of Americans stuck at home.

During the initial spike, Tine explained, King Arthur had enough flour to fill orders because the pipeline was full in preparation for Easter. In fact, throughout the whole flour "shortage," he said, there was never insufficient grain or even milling time to turn the grain into flour. The roadblocks were bagging capacity and speed of distribution.

Starting in mid-March, King Arthur was in constant communication with its milling and distribution partners to add shifts and speed up delivery, Tine said. The company paid the extra cost of shipping flour from

mills by truck instead of the usual railcars. And King Arthur signed a contract with a new distribution center to get grocery shelves restocked as quickly as possible; it also negotiated a partnership with an additional mill.

But no matter what company leaders did, it felt like they were just plugging holes in a leaky bathtub. There simply were not enough additional bagging lines at any of their partners to fill the orders.

"As soon as a truckload of flour came in, it was sold that next day," Tine said. Unlike toilet paper hoarding, he pointed out, people were using all the flour they bought and heading back for more: "People were actually baking."

To the surprise even of those in the flour business, it turned out that the quarantine was compelling people to bake, whether because they couldn't get out to buy their daily loaf, they craved comfort food or they simply had a lot of time on their hands. Suddenly, social media feeds were filled with photos of pies, cakes, cookies and crusty loaves of sourdough tagged #quarantinebaking.

SPEAKING UP

King Arthur's management team is well aware that there is always room to do better. Last November, senior leadership started on-going diversity, equity and inclusion training. The program was to be rolled out to the entire company, until the pandemic put it on pause.

"We've got to be more proactive and more forward-looking on how to make sure that we're actively getting all people to our table," said Tine.

While women are well represented in management at King Arthur, the company has very little racial diversity. "We live in a white state," said co-CEO Karen Colberg, quickly adding, "That doesn't absolve us from trying to talk about [race], to raise awareness, to make change and to be in it."

On June 1, King Arthur reacted to the protests sparked by the police killing of George Floyd with a social media post condemning "the devastating racial injustices that continue to plague our country" and announcing a \$200,000 fund to support racial justice changemaking organizations.

This was a big step for a company whose potentially controversial statements had previously been limited to "Say no to raw dough" (due to the risk of E. coli in raw flour, not salmonella in raw eggs).

Only a few hundred of the 39,000-plus Facebook reactions to the racial justice post were negative. The social media team responded with a firm but empathic reiteration of the company's position.

Social advocacy, Colberg acknowledged, "is new for King Arthur, and it's the right thing to do for us." The company had been planning to launch a Pride Month campaign instead on June 1 but decided to postpone it. Although some have accused big consumer brands of jumping on the cause bandwagon, King Arthur felt compelled to take a clear stand, she continued, "not because of some expected payoff—though I do believe people value it."

To those who say King Arthur should stick to baking, Colberg responds, "If we can't speak to what is unfair . . . then we are not being responsible leaders to our organization and our society as a whole. There are so many injustices out there and we have to do better."

NEW NORMAL

At about 9:30 a.m. on Friday, June 12, the bread bakers at King Arthur's Norwich headquarters were wrapping up their shift that had started at 3:30 a.m. Masked and well spaced, two bakers lifted rounds of dough, folding and shaping them deftly.

On the pastry side, the scent of cinnamon was so strong it seeped through the glass viewing windows and visitors' mandatory masks.

During Vermont's "Stay Home, Stay Safe" period, the King Arthur bakery continued to bake at reduced volume for local customers. The retail store had just reopened with strict safety guidelines. Jeanne Seymour had driven 70 miles from Guilford as soon as she heard the news. Her basket was soon full of baking tools and ingredients.

"I love that it's Vermont, that it's one of our companies," she said, "and that it's employee-owned."

In a classroom, a pair of education center employees were bagging loaves they'd baked for local community groups. The tally had just reached 10,000 loaves donated during the pandemic—15,000 including those baked at King Arthur's Washington education center. Both locations are targeting late July or early August to restart classes—albeit with fewer students to ensure social distancing.

The Norwich complex fondly known as Camelot by King Arthur employees is slowly moving back toward normal.

The question for King Arthur is what "normal" will look like, at that facility and around the country. Baking usually slows in the summertime, Tine said, but as of mid-June, sales are up more than 50 percent compared to a year ago. "I would say that they're settling in, not settling down," he said. "We're settling in to a new normal."

The company feels confident it has developed systems to respond to any future spike in demand. The challenge, Colberg explained, is to figure out how to nurture the new interest in baking hatched by the pandemic. "How do we engage people that have shown some interest in baking and keep them baking?" she pondered.

The bigger question, perhaps, is whether baking during the pandemic has taught Americans anything.

"I think people like the tactile aspect of it: the touching, the smelling, the feeling. We don't always engage all of our senses in what we do," Furch of the Baker's Hotline said. "Baking also forces you to pay attention to somebody else's rhythm, which is the rhythm of the dough. I think people are learning patience."

REFERRAL OF NOMINEES FOR FEDERAL RETIREMENT THRIFT INVESTMENT BOARD

Mr. VAN HOLLEN. Mr. President, I support the referral for a committee hearing of the nominations of Frank Dunlevy, Christopher Bancroft Burnham, and John M. Barger to be Members of the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

TRIBUTE TO ROBERT J. HALSTEAD

● Ms. ROSEN. Mr. President, it is my honor today to recognize the career and service of Robert J. Halstead, a pillar of the Nevada environmental community, who retired earlier this month after serving the great State of Nevada for over three decades.

Bob has been instrumental as a leader in the fight against the failed and fiscally irresponsible proposal to dump our Nation's nuclear waste at the Yucca Mountain site in Nevada. Since

2001, Bob has served as the executive director for the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects, where his watchful eye and his inexhaustible passion for protecting our State has been an invaluable resource.

On numerous occasions, Bob has stood before the State and the U.S. Congress to share his expertise on the subjects of nuclear waste, radioactive materials, and nuclear waste transportation.

We owe Bob Halstead a debt of gratitude for the crucial work he has done to protect Nevadans and the State itself from becoming the Nation's nuclear dumping ground.

Bob also has defended the state beyond the Yucca Mountain fight. Two years ago, when it came to light that the Department of Energy had secretly shipped a half ton of weapons-grade plutonium to the Nevada National Security Site, Bob led the charge to right this incredible wrong committed against our State.

I am deeply grateful for Bob's tireless work to protect the health and safety of our community and our environment. He has been a source of great support for me and my staff, offering his unmatched knowledge of the complex history of Yucca Mountain and our State's fight against the ill-advised proposal, to which Nevadans have never consented.

Even though Bob is taking a step back from his work and is beginning a well-deserved retirement, I know that he will remain a continued source of inspiration, knowledge, and passion as we continue in our fight to defend Nevada. I thank Bob Halstead for a lifetime of service, and I wish him and his family all the best in this new chapter of life.●

RECOGNIZING JWR CONSTRUCTION SERVICES, INC.

● Mr. RUBIO. Mr. President, as chairman of the Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, each week I recognize a small business that exemplifies the American entrepreneurial spirit at the heart of our country. It is my privilege to recognize a family-owned small business that builds high-quality projects and is actively involved in several community organizations. This week, it is my pleasure to honor JWR Construction Services, Inc., of Deerfield Beach, FL, as the Senate Small Business of the Week.

In 1985, Jerry DuBois and William Gallo founded JWR Construction Services in Deerfield Beach, FL. Recognizing a need for well-built commercial buildings, they combined Jerry's project management expertise and William's architectural skill to start their general contracting and construction management firm. From the beginning, Jerry and William established passion, respect, ownership, service, and safety as the core values of their company. They prioritized customer service and community involvement.

Over the next 35 years, JWR Construction finished construction projects throughout Florida. They have built affordable multi-family housing, healthcare facilities, and senior living centers, along with commercial and industrial facilities. Notably, JWR Construction has completed projects for the University of Miami, Johnson & Wales University, Nova Southeastern University, and Florida Atlantic University.

JWR Construction creates dignified work for their employees and contractors, ensuring social mobility and supporting the skilled trades. They emphasize hiring veterans including Jerry's son, Dustin, who is a U.S. Navy veteran. Dustin served for 5 years as a machinist mate and special warfare combatant-craft crewman. He joined the family business in 2009 and currently serves as its chief operating officer.

Through their leadership and service, JWR Construction has advocated for the contracting industry and south Florida community. In addition to earning several local industry awards, JWR Construction is active in the Associated Builders and Contractors Florida East Coast chapter, with two members serving on the local 2020 board of directors. JWR Construction has partnered with dozens of community organizations, including the Boys and Girls Club, the Deerfield Beach Little League team, and the Broward Navy Days. Jerry serves on the board of Rebuilding Together Broward, which revitalizes homes for low-income individuals, especially veterans.

Like many Floridian small businesses, JWR Construction Services stepped up to support its community during the coronavirus pandemic. When the Deerfield Beach Housing Authority hosted its seventh Annual Destination Graduation for local low-income high school seniors, JWR Construction helped organize a drive-through graduation celebration. They provided a laptop for each graduating student, donating a total of \$14,000 in graduation gifts.

When the U.S. Small Business Administration launched the Paycheck Protection Program, Jerry and William applied immediately. The PPP provides forgivable loans to impacted small businesses and nonprofits who maintain their payroll during the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2019, JWR Construction received a PPP loan, which enabled them to keep 37 employees paid and allowed them to safely continue their essential work in south Florida.

JWR Construction Services is an incredible example of how hard work and strong values can create a business that is both successful and beneficial to the community that it serves. I commend their important work. Congratulations to Jerry, William, Dustin, and the entire team at JWR Construction Services. I look forward to watching your continued growth and investment in the south Florida community.●

25TH ANNIVERSARY OF VIRGINIA ORGANIZING

● Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, I wish to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Virginia Organizing, a nonpartisan grassroots group committed to challenging injustice by empowering people in local communities across the Commonwealth to work together, democratically and nonviolently, for change.

For a quarter century, Virginia Organizing has led the debate on the most important issues of our time, including economic security for families, equal opportunity in education, a sustainable environment, access to healthcare, and the guarantee that every person is entitled to have their voice heard.

Virginia Organizing and I share a common goal, one that I have spoken about many times, that all Virginians and all Americans should have a fair shot at success. We share the belief that all people should be treated fairly and with dignity in all aspects of life, regardless of race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, ability, or country of origin.

Now more than ever, I am proud to serve alongside a group that embraces and celebrates diversity. This year, to celebrate their 25th anniversary, I would like to again recognize and thank the leaders, members, and staff of Virginia Organizing, who continue to work tirelessly to provide children, low-income residents, immigrants, veterans, retirees, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups with the resources that they need to have a fair shot. I am so grateful for their work for the people of the Commonwealth and wish them well as they embark on their next quarter-century.●

MEASURES PLACED ON THE CALENDAR

The following bill was read the first and second times by unanimous consent, and placed on the calendar:

H.R. 6395. An act to authorize appropriations for fiscal year 2021 for military activities of the Department of Defense, for military construction, and for defense activities of the Department of Energy, to prescribe military personnel strengths for such fiscal year, and for other purposes.

MEASURES READ THE FIRST TIME

The following bill was read the first time:

S. 4461. A bill to provide for a period of continuing appropriations in the event of a lapse in appropriations under the normal appropriations process, and establish procedures and consequences in the event of a failure to enact appropriations.

EXECUTIVE REPORTS OF COMMITTEE

The following executive reports of nominations were submitted:

By Mr. CRAPO for the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs.